

Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY MANILA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1237

INFO AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

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DIA WASHDC

CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 3085

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, RP

SUBJECT: NEW MEDIA POLICY ON MINDANAO

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

REF: MANILA 2875

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: SINCE PRESIDENT ANNOUNCED "NEW MEDIA POLICY" FOR MINDANAO WAR ON MARCH 1, MANILA PRESS HAS PRINTED UNPRECEDENTED VOLUME OF NEWSON REBELLION, IN TERMS MOSTLY BUT NOT EXCLUSIVELY FAVORABLE TO GOP. AS INDICATED BY EXAMPLES BRIEFLY NOTED BELOW IT IS CLEAR THAT MARCOS HAS DECIDED TO CONTINUE HIS REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN POLICY OF PUBLICIZING MINDANAO IN ORDER TO RALLY SUPPORT FOR "CRISIS GOVERNMENT". NEW POLICY MAY COMPLICATE TASK OF MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RECONCILIATION BUT (IF CONTINUED) MAY ALSO HELP TO NARROW ENORMOUS CREDIBILITY GAP WHICH HAS RESULTED FROM PREVIOUS CRUDE BLACKOUT. END SUMMARY.

2. AT MARCH 1 PRESS CONFERENCE PRESIDENT MARCOS ANNOUNCED "NEW MEDIA POLICY" FOR MINDANAO REBELLION INCLUDING GREATER ACCESS TO COMBAT AREAS BY DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN REPORTERS.

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WHILE WE ARE NOT SURE WHETHER FILIPINO REPORTERS WILL HENCEFORTH

ENJOY GREATER ACCESS OR NOT (AND FOREIGNERS HAVE ENJOYED RELATIVE FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT ALL ALONG) IT IS TRUE THAT LOCAL PRESS HAS (SINCE REFERENDUM) STARTED TO REPORT THE WAR WITH UNPRECEDENTED DEGREE OF COVERAGE. FOR EXAMPLE:

A. BASED ON DEFENSE DEPARTMENT BRIEFING, PAPERS OF MARCH 7 REPORTED ACTION NEAR SMALL ISLAND OF BASBAS IN TAWI-TAWI VICINITY IN WHICH HOME DEFENSE UNIT (COMPOSED OF EX-REBELS), KILLED TWELVE ATTACKERS, INCLUDING TWO REBEL "COMMANDERS", HAJI ISAHAC AND MOHAMMED HATTA (SIC.) PAPERS ALSO REPORTED ACTIONS BY ARMED FORCES (AFP) IN ZAMBOANGA AREA (WHERE LARGE CACHE OF FRENCH-MADE MORTAR SHELLS REPORT-EDLY CAPTURED). AFP REPORTED ON THE OFFENSIVE IN COTABATO AREA AFTER THWARTING REBEL ATTEMPTS TO SEIZE COTABATO CITY. ON STORY NOTED THAT 96 INCOMING REBEL MORTAR ROUNDS HAVE HIT CEMOM HEADQUARTERS IN COTABATO THIS YEAR.

B. ON MARCH 10 PRESS REPORTED THAT THREE GOVERNMENT BATTALIONS HAD PUSHED BACK UP TO 5,000 REBELS "MASSING" ON BASILAN ISLAND AND THAT AFP ALSO MOUNTING OPERATIONS OFF BONGAO ISLAND IN TAWI-TAWI AREA.

C. ALSO MARCH 10 PAPERS REPORTED CAPTURE OF COTABATO REBEL ABDULKHADIR CANDAO AND 39 FOLLOWERS IN ELABORATELY STAGED CEREMONY IN COTABATO CITY. (EMBASSY INFORMATION INDICATES THAT CANDAO WAS MILITARY COMMANDER FOR SULTAN KUDARAT AND BULDON CITIES--I.E., A MIDDLE-RANKING PROVINCE LEVEL LEADER--WHOSE DEFECTION HAS BEEN EXPECTED FOR SOME TIME."

3. IN REPORTING BASBAS ISLAND ACTION ASSOCIATED PRESS CHIEF CORRESPONDENT ARNOLD ZEITLIN (WHO RARELY DISPLAYS EXCESSIVE CHARITY TO GOP) NOTED THAT BRIEFING WAS "FIRST EXTENSIVE ACCOUNT OF FIGHTING IN MINDANAO AND SULU (GIVEN BY MILITARY) IN MORE THAN TWO YEARS "AND" A MARKED CHANGE FROM THE MILITARY POLICY ON WITHHOLDING INFORMATION OMOST OPERATIONS DURING THE PAST TWO YEARS OF FIGHTING IN THE SOUTH."

4. COMMENT: MARCOS HAS EVIDENTLY DECIDED TO CONTINUE HIS REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN POLICY OF PUBLICIZING MINDANAO SITUATION IN ORDER TO RALLY PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR "CRISIS GOVERNMENT".
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AS INDICATED BY THE ABOVE EXAMPLES, VIRTUALLY ALL COVER-AGE BASED ON MILITARY BRIEFING AND IS EITHER ABOUT GOVERN-MENT VICTORIES OR (LIKE ENRILE'S MARCH 3 ACCOUNTING OF MUS-LIM ATROCITIES) DISCREDITS THE REBELS. BAD NEWS (INCLUDING GOVERNMENT CASUALTIES) NO DOUBT BEING DOWNPLAYED OR IN SOME CASES IGNORED. NEVERTHELESS, NEW POLICY IS NOT WITHOUT SOME RISK TO GOVERNMENT AS HITHERTO ANESTHETIZED PUBLIC BEGINS TO REALIZE EXTENT OF FIGHTING IN SOUTH. AS NOTED REFTEL

WITH REGARD TO PUBLICIZING OF REBEL ATROCITIES IT MAY ALSO COMPLICATE TASK OF RECONCILIATION. MOREOVER, NEWS SUCH AS THAT REGARDING GOVERNMENT OFFENSIVE IN COTABATO COULD STIMULATE REBEL RETALIATION. BUT IF CONTINUED AND BRIEFINGS BEAR SOME RELATIONSHIP TO FACT, NEW POLICY COULD IN TIME BEGIN TO NARROW TREMENDOUS CREDIBILITY GAP WHICH HAS OPENED AS RESULT OF CRUDE NEWS BLACKOUT PREVALENT UP TO NOW.

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